Towards Fairer Assessment

Abstract
Drawing on the largest Australian collection and analysis of empirical data on multiple facets of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in state schools to date, this article critically analyses the systemic push for standardized testing and improved scores, and argues for a greater balance of assessment types by providing alternative, inclusive, participatory approaches to student assessment. The evidence for this article derives from a major evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities (SSLC). The first large-scale picture of what is occurring in classroom assessment and pedagogy for Indigenous students is reported in this evaluation yet the focus in this article remains on the issue of fairness in student assessment. The argument presented calls for "a good balance between formative and summative assessment" (OECD 2013) at a time of unrelenting high-stakes, standardized testing in Australia with a dominance of secondary as opposed to primary uses of NAPLAN data by systems, schools and principals. A case for more "intelligent accountability in education" (O'Neill 2013) together with a framework for analyzing efforts toward social justice in education (Cazden 2012) and fairer assessment make the case for more alternative assessment practices in recognition of the need for teachers' pedagogic practice to cater for increased diversity.

Key Words – student assessment, fairness, intelligent accountability, social justice, Indigenous education

Introduction
This article is written at a time in Australia of escalating student diversity and increasing accountability. The Australian student population is growing increasingly diverse, culturally, ethnically, socially and linguistically, which poses significant demands on teacher pedagogy and classroom assessment practice. The policy context of the Australian curriculum and associated changes to assessment practices bring to the fore key questions about fairness and social justice given the drive to achieve not only improved student learning but high equity as a major systemic priority. Concurrently, greater accountability pressures are resulting in unintended effects of inhibiting and limiting teachers' pedagogic practices. The irony is that the context of increasing diversity of the student population together with equity demands implies the need for alternative, supportive, pedagogic approaches with a variety of assessment types. Quality, alternative, assessment practices are now more significant than ever to gain a more holistic view of the learner and more equitable outcomes for all students.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to thinking about fairness in student assessment from a social justice perspective and to stimulate further discussion in the area of classroom assessment practices and policies to meet the needs of diverse students. The case for further research and development on quality classroom assessment is presented. Examples of how the federal government has used student assessment data to hold schools to account, and evidence of how such secondary uses can result in perverse effects, are drawn on to elaborate the case for improvement of Indigenous students' learning outcomes through the use of alternative assessment practices including Personalised Learning Plans[1] (PLPs).

The article is also written with the understanding that "more accountability is not always better, and that processes of holding to account can impose high costs without securing substantial benefits" (O'Neill 2013: 4). O'Neill's explains how assessment systems hold teachers to account by reusing assessment data for "second-order purposes." The results of such practice can lead to damaging consequences or perverse effects. O'Neill (2013) cites Strathern's formulation of Goodhart's law, which warns against the reuse of assessment data to hold third parties to account: "when a measure becomes a target it ceases to be a good measure" (Strathern 1997: 308). It is the "second-order purposes" of the use of assessment data that cause concern and are problematic. For assessment systems that use the same evidence to hold to account the students who are being assessed as well as to hold their teachers to account deserve greater scrutiny. This is because knowing that one is held to account for others' performance, as measured by a given system of assessment, may well impact on "the action of those who do the preparation" (O'Neill 2013:5). While systems may aim to increase

[1] Personalised Learning Plans should not be confused with terms such as 'Individualised Education Program' as used in the United States or the Canadian term 'Individual Education Plan' which refer to support programs or plans for 'exceptional pupils' or students with special needs.

standards of student achievement by holding teachers and schools to account, in reality such second-order uses may result in teachers and schools responding to such accountability in ways that impact negatively on the performance being measured. From the evidence obtained from the research and evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities (SSLC) project it would appear that standardized NAPLAN testing has diverted time away from teaching to preparation for the summative tests with teachers providing opportunities for their students to rehearse or practice performances in preparation for the tests.

While there is a place for testing to fulfill summative purposes the argument that is presented here calls for a balance in the inclusion of alternative student assessment practices for the improvement of learning outcomes for Indigenous[2] students and the avoidance of the reuse of assessment data for "second-order purposes". A framework for social justice in education as developed by Courtney Cazden (2012), underpinned by Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice including the three dimensions of redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural) and representation (political), will be utilized to frame the analysis in support of the argument developed.

Context

Following Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in 2008, all Australian governments "adopted a new approach and committed to six ambitious, long term, Closing the Gap targets which aim to bridge the divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities" (DEEWR 2008: iii). Of the six targets the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) has key responsibility for the following:

- to ensure all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years;
- to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children within a decade;
- to halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and
- to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade. (DEEWR 2012)

The summative evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities (SSLC) project, funded by DEEWR led to major findings and implications with recommendations for policy actions. This article makes reference to the findings that pertain to assessment. The SSLC project was proposed as a network of 60 learning communities across Australia with a focus on key Indigenous education priorities. The aim was that a 'high-expectations approach' to educating Indigenous students would result in significant impacts. The network aimed to support school reform through the "building of leadership capacity and sustainability of improved student outcomes within Indigenous communities," (Indigenous Education Leadership Institute 2009: 2). This project was an attempt to support the improvement of Indigenous students' learning in a context of 'Closing the Gap' targets, increased summative testing and accountability.

In 2008 the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) with the extension of testing to include Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 brought about the increasing prominence of accountability testing in Australian public education policy. In 2010, the publication of NAPLAN results on the MySchool website (www.myschool.edu.au) confirmed the high stakes nature of this national testing program. The suggestion that parents would have the necessary data for choice of school for their children was made, yet silence remained around the issue of equity and fairness in assessment. Patterns of under-achievement by Indigenous students were reflected in national benchmark data (NAPLAN) and international testing programs like the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Such international comparative analyses of student achievement data raised awareness of the under-achievement of Indigenous students and stimulated government spending in support of innovative programs such as the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities (SSLC) program. This program involved a network of schools, based on a 'learning communities' or a 'communities of practice'

[2] Throughout this paper I will use a capital for the word Indigenous as a mark of respect and as is protocol in academic writing.

model, which aimed to spread the key messages about school reform and about education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. A national network of schools with a shared philosophy and commitment to improved outcomes for Indigenous students and communities was proposed to work with and across state systems that have diverse and varied policies on Indigenous education, school reform, structure and staffing, as well as across different demographic levels within each state. Hub schools in liaison with SSLC staff developed relations with Affiliate schools for purposes of collaborative exchange, modeling and development. This network was designed for dispersal and scaling up innovation and demonstrable quality and efficacy in improving Indigenous student outcomes.

Methodology

A Core Evaluation Team based at a University, Faculty of Education was charged with independent, formative and summative evaluations of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities (SSLC) program. The research design of the evaluations was qualitative and quantitative, cross-sectional and longitudinal. Data for the summative evaluation was gathered from interviews (n = 525) with Indigenous community members (75), community and regional staff (14), students (147) and school workers (54); interviews with and observations of school leaders (80), head teachers and co-ordinators (31), teachers (119), administrative staff (3), counselors (2) and key school staff (31); field observation visits to selected SSLC schools over a three year period; survey responses and self-reports by a large sample of SSLC and non-SSLC schools; multilevel statistical analysis of 2009/2010 systemic data on test score achievement, attendance and other school profile indicators provided by state and territory governments.

The findings from the major summative evaluation as they relate to assessment and monitoring of student achievement and progress in SSLC Hub schools have been analysed and interpreted using a framework for social justice in education (Cazden 2012). What is evident in applying this framing to the analysis of the findings is that the redistribution and recognition dimensions of Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice become important for "'closing the gap' in academic achievement," and "representation is [also] important for school and community relations" (Cazden 2012: 178).

Fairness and Validity

Increasing financial uncertainties and the consequential differences in economic status, combined with the differences in both social and cultural capital for the full range of students, give rise to important questions of how assessment systems can be fairer and what the implications are for teacher development particularly as this applies to assessment capability. Fairness in assessment requires teachers and systems to consider the social contexts of assessment and, as defined more broadly by Gipps and Stobart (2009: 105), moves beyond the technical definition of a concern with test construction to a more encompassing view of "what precedes an assessment (for example, access and resources)" or recognitive and redistributive justice.

Fairness in assessment from this view includes "its consequences (for example, interpretations of results and impact) as well as aspects of the assessment design itself" (Gipps and Stobart 2009: 105). It is here that O'Neill's case for more intelligent forms of accountability becomes significant because of the perverse effects of current accountability systems on students' future learning trajectories. Examples are evident when a system of accountability "creates incentives for pupils and institutions to gravitate to subjects where adequate or good scores or points are perceived as more readily available" and students are displaced "… into courses that are less educationally desirable for them" (O'Neill 2013: 8).

In the pursuit of fairness and equity in assessment it is fundamental that all students are given the opportunity to demonstrate learning and that the form of the assessment does not override the knowledge to be assessed (Gipps & Stobart 2009). It is important therefore to acknowledge that students from different cultures, ethnic backgrounds or social circumstances will have different qualities and experiences that they bring to the classroom learning contexts. In the interest of fairness to "treat all students the same", as expressed by many teachers who were interviewed, illustrates a limited understanding of the concept and of validity.

The hallmark of quality in the context of education and measurement is validity the "single most important criterion" for evaluating an assessment method (Koretz 2008: 215). Ultimately, "validity and validation are concerned with the quality or potential of an assessment method" (Newton and

Shaw, forthcoming). When an assessment method is declared as valid then its potential for supporting good measurement and decision-making is claimed. Fairness in assessment must therefore be considered in relation to the students' access to the curriculum and the educational opportunities (Gipps and Stobart 2009). The differences in students' performances on standardised tests for many students from diverse backgrounds arise from access issues and the opportunities that they have to demonstrate their learning. It has been argued elsewhere (Author 2011) that all students should have access to the literacy demands of the test and not be disadvantaged by the fact that they may not have Standard Australian English as their first language. Assessment capable teachers understand and practice the fundamental principles of assessment design such as ensuring that the assessments they design are fit for purpose and that the mode of assessment impacts positively on teaching and learning (Gipps 1994).

Assessment and Learning

It is important to illustrate why more authentic and negotiated assessment and planning provides a viable alternative to present assessment practice prior to a discussion of the key assessment related findings and their policy implications for systems. Overall the findings relate to the ways in which schools and leaders are using assessment data for a range of purposes, which in some cases constitute second-order purposes. O'Neill (2013: 5) in her call for more intelligent accountability systems has clearly articulated how "secondary use of assessment evidence to hold teachers and schools to account can damage primary, educational use of that assessment".

A greater balance between formative and summative purposes and alternatives to an overreliance on standardised assessment has recently been recommended in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes. The policy advice recommends that the student is placed at the centre of the evaluation and assessment framework, and that a variety of assessment types be used to develop a more holistic view of student learning (OECD 2013). There is also a clear priority for systems to focus on improving classroom practices to optimise the potential of evaluation and assessment to improve student learning with the recommendation that policy makers promote regular use of evaluation and assessment results for improvements in the classroom.

In the United States, The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education established by the Educational Testing Service in January 2011, has recommended that systems of assessment include methods "that provide teachers with actionable information about their students and their practice in real time" (Gordon Commission 2013: 8). The Commission also reported how the emphasis on "measuring student performance at a single point in time with assessments whose primary purpose is to provide information to constituencies external to the classroom has, to a large extent, neglected the other purposes of assessment" (Gordon Commission 2013: 10). Therefore "radically different forms of assessments" and "challenging performance tasks that better represent the learning activities that will help students develop the competencies needed to succeed in the 21st century" have been called for.

Such international reviews and recommendations are significant to the findings of the evaluation report. Principals and teachers demonstrated only limited expertise and training in the analysis and the use of test scores and other performance data to improve student learning. Although principals reported and were observed, attempting to use test score data as evidence for decision-making, there were very few instances where school leaders had specialised training or relevant expertise in data analysis. We observed only isolated instances where principals used test data for developmental, diagnostic purposes and for the selection of specific curriculum interventions, particularly for attending to the learning needs of diverse student cohorts. Very limited use of a variety of assessment types to gain a more holistic view of student learning was observed.

Findings

With the changed accountability context in Australia over the past decade it has become apparent that a dominant influence on school planning, policy and pedagogy is the improvement of NAPLAN test scores. A consistent systemic push to improve NAPLAN scores was reported by principals with identified assessment practices focused strongly on NAPLAN complemented by a dominant pedagogical concentration on basic skills and vocational education.

The picture painted is one of a system concerned with deficit and pull-out remediation programs, testing, streaming and tracking with attention to basic skills instruction and testing. Streaming and ability grouping are common at all levels of primary and secondary education and this would appear to

be yet another perverse effect of the current approach to accountability. Accompanying such measures are test preparation lessons, retailoring pedagogy by schools and teachers and, in instances, whole school programs and timetabling in what was viewed as efforts to improve test score results. At the same time, streaming and tracking practices are ubiquitous in the teaching of Indigenous students. This consists of a combination of ability grouping in primary basic skills instruction, whole class homogeneous grouping for stated purposes of behaviour management and targetted teaching, pull-out programs and special education remediation models, and tracking into vocational and non-academic programs in the middle and secondary years. These are some of the damaging effects of secondary uses of assessment data to call teachers and schools to account.

Very little evidence of innovation or the building of teacher expertise in classroom assessment (e.g., task-based assessment, high quality assessment) was identified. The lack of expertise and innovation with little explicit discussion of dominant practices of streaming and ability grouping constitute major issues related to fairness in assessment. Teacher proficiency in assessment and/or innovation with classroom based assessment and the use of models of authentic assessment, assessment-for-learning, or task-based assessment are important for inclusive education.

The use of Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) was identified as one viable approach to authentic and negotiated assessment and planning, though these practices require training and systematic implementation. The use of Personal Learning Plans is mandated for Indigenous students in several states of Australia, such as New South Wales. Samples of PLPs that were analysed reflected different levels and degrees of rigour and implementation, suggesting the many issues and challenges that are involved in their implementation. Where they were focused on negotiation and engagement of Indigenous parents and students in dialogue over aspirations, pathways, cultural resources and challenges, PLPs had value in addressing issues raised by communities and students about teacher and school knowledge of Indigenous families and cultures. Together with other assessment types this approach to assessment is considered to be fairer and a more just approach in obtaining a more holistic representation of a student's achievement.

Data Use

Baseline data collection is a requirement in some regions of some states and is collected in a number of SSLC schools to determine ability groups, to organise curriculum, to plan lessons but also to plan the use of assessment tools and resources. One Provincial Hub primary School had established the role of 'data keeper,' which was taken up by the Assistant Principal who indicated:

> [we] have *developed a lot of the baseline data assessment* that we've used and so over time we've put those together. So *it's a team effort and that's probably the strength of it***.** It's not just one person; it's actually a team approach and I think that's why it's been so successful and that's why people see the benefit of maintaining the role [of 'data keeper'].
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> What we decided to do, as for the benchmark data … [we are] looking at assessment across the three strands of literacy, and maths, and the *assessments would be done at the end of the year and they are at stage-appropriate level.*

Across the region where this primary school is located, schools are required to collate NAPLAN data, Benchmarking (running records), and Best Start Kindergarten Assessment data in aspects of literacy. This school with over 40% Indigenous students uses the Aboriginal Education and Training Policy of the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/students/access_equity/aborig_edu/PD20080385.shtml) as a key driver for the school's Indigenous Education programs. The school has attracted additional resources from the *Priority Schools Program,* which supports low SES communities, and the *Schools in Partnership* (SiP) initiative for schools with high Indigenous enrolments. Funds from these programs were used to establish the role of 'data keeper' undertaken by the Assistant Principal (AP) who organises and collates school level information in association with NAPLAN data. The AP maintains the data management across the school, including the facilitation of the Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs) – this data management system is online so that all staff have access.

Data collection schedules at this school indicate when teachers must supply data to the school's central system. For example, the baseline data collection schedule for Term One requires teachers to provide results from the given assessment tasks: Week 1 – Spelling; Week 2 – Reading; Week 3 – Writing;

Week 4 – Talking and Listening; and Week 5 – Mathematics. Teachers are provided with assessment tools and informed about a suite of stage-appropriate resources. This level of data collection is supplemented by literacy and numeracy work samples and assessments from Early Stage 1, Stage 1, Stage 2 and Stage 3; Reading to Learn; and PLPs. The collation and interpretation of this data performs a formative evaluation function, informing the school's strategies and targets in their management plan. It also informs classroom curriculum and teaching programming, and reports to parents.

The above case, driven by state systemic policies, is more detailed and specific than those observed in most other states. More generally, the approach to data analysis and use was less formal. The following provincial Hub school with over 60% Indigenous students took a more typical approach as explained by the principal.

> We have in Term Four, a day that we're dedicating to analysing our data and looking at our site improvement plan, our priorities, and working out where we're going to set our targets … we've streamlined our data collection … We've streamlined our data so that it is relevant. We know that we have to look at NAPLAN … we thought, 'it's there, let's use it'… We utilise [NAPLAN data] at a school level … at a classroom level, and a teacher's level. We get together and we spend a couple of staff meetings in term 4 and we'll be doing that in this day *where we look at and try and work out how the children answered each of the questions and why they might have answered. It helps us to try and work things out.*

Nonetheless, the overall level of training and preparedness of principals and other senior management for the use of data for school level functions appeared to be minimal. Very few examples of specialised training or guidance for principals in data analysis, and in data use, are provided by state or regional jurisdictions. On the Leader Survey, *no school leaders reported having had specialist training in data analysis and use.*

Tracking, streaming, ability grouping and pull-out classes

A recent OECD (2012) study on equity in schools reiterated the longstanding empirical finding that homogeneous ability grouping can entrench disadvantage as readily as it might lead to targeted skill instruction, especially when it is undertaken in early years education and when resultant groupings are not sufficiently permeable and flexible (cf. Oakes 2005). Holding schools to account on the basis of their NAPLAN scores is a further example of a second-order use of evidence that is negatively impacting on the educational use of that data. The accountability pressures and related incentive systems have resulted in streaming and timetabling changes with offerings of specific subjects to particular students. For example, some students in SSLC schools select subjects where adequate or good grades are seen as more accessible. Such subject selection, described as a form of "cognitive architecture" (Teese & Polesel 2003), moves students along differential pathways beginning in the middle years.

In the following very remote school with 80% Indigenous students, streaming of students was acknowledged as policy by the school administration and was evident in the classes observed. The result was a marked streaming of Aboriginal students, who tended to overpopulate the lower level groupings with non-Aboriginal students dominating the high level groupings. At the outset of each observed lesson the teachers tended to teach to the high level groups, and then work more closely with the lower level groups. Staff indicated that students were very aware of their particular placements within classes and that this was accepted policy and a clear practice to accommodate the vast gap in abilities. The streaming practices were considered compatible with the implementation of the Stronger Smarter approach based on "high expectations". Here the principal explains how the tracking, streaming and ability grouping procedures operate within this very remote school:

> When the kids arrive they're assessed … so there's that placement stuff straight away and then … at the end of the year there is the assessment for the kids in terms of what class they will be put into. *Then you've got the [regional literacy] profiles, which they use … in fact it's probably very heavy data driven*… not low on progress, but I think [our school] is in a unique situation because they show progress from year to year when they assess the kids and the kids are placed into the classes.

> There's actually kids, you know, *they're assessed straight away and they're put in this class that's according to their ability, but within an age group.* Clearly you can't have a Year 7 in with a Year 3, but it's clearly - having more homogenous classes.

Streaming, tracking and ability grouping were identified in some SSLC Hub schools visited – a pattern confirmed in both SSLC and non-SSLC schools in the survey data. The exceptions to this were very small schools that required multi-age, heterogeneous groupings.

Diagnostic use of data

Data use for developmental, diagnostic purposes was evident at primary, combined and secondary SSLC schools in very remote, remote, provincial and metropolitan contexts. The interpretation and analysis of data was central to identifying collective or individual areas for development or curriculum support at a school level, such as, in setting priorities for improving reading levels at the primary phase or for teachers at a particular Year level to include vocabulary extension at the secondary phase of schooling. Student achievement data use was analysed at the cohort and individual levels for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students on an ongoing basis.

In whole school or one-to-one meetings, teachers and principals shared students' attainment levels and predominant priorities for teacher and student development. In what follows a primary principal of a provincial school explains the process and the way in which data was used for target setting and identifying areas for support and development.

> *There were 2000 sight words so in reception we made an agreement that the children need to know 50* and then it moves on. And obviously *by* the time they get to *Year 7 they need to know the whole 2000.*

> And so it was a lot of work to do especially for the Year 6 and 7 teachers because they had to go through every child and make sure they could read, and what we said to them was as soon as they got five words wrong they had to stop and get the children to practice those five words, before they moved on to the next. Here a provincial primary Hub school principal indicates:

> *The sight words take on a variety. They are the magic 100 words, magic 200 words, there's a Salisbury sight word list* [3], there's also words that [the Literacy/ Numeracy co-ordinator] has pulled together from places, from *Centrelink* and that the children would need to use because some of our children actually do a lot of the literacy for their parents so we looked at the types of words that they would learn to read and incorporate in the 2000. … What we are finding now is *some of our Year 7s … can read 2000 words that we have given them. … And we are starting to toy with the idea of maybe upping our targets.*

This type of diagnostic use of data constitutes an example of the basic skills pedagogy model in action with the analysis of assessment data leading to the *use of drill and practice* and *practice testing strategies* at this school.

Data use for planning

The data management systems that schools have developed inform their planning strategies. The principals are using available data sets to monitor teachers' performance. NAPLAN test data is used to indicate achievement and performance at the levels of the student, the teacher and the school. These constitute further second-order uses of assessment data and have had unintended consequences on central educational aims. Here a primary principal, indicates the insufficiency of the NAPLAN data and the need for alternative assessments and records to support and illustrate achievement:

> … looking at which children in the following year may need some type of intervention and in what specific areas…the other thing that we look at is running records of the whole school…

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[3] Created from research into children's writing vocabularies done at Salisbury Teacher's College in the 1970s. The list is sectioned into the first 50 words which account for 49% of all words written by Adelaide students in years 3 to 7; the second 50 accounts for 10% of all words written; and the next 200 words make up 4% of all words written. Although it is a writing vocabulary, it does reflect the high frequency words in books and is commonly used as a reading sight vocabulary. (http://www.raisingreaders.com.au/resources/Assessment/salis_vocab.htm)

> *we collect them throughout the year, they show the growth more than what NAPLAN does.* We get really frustrated because we know our children, sometimes it's not the best assessment for them [Indigenous students]; it doesn't suit their learning style.

There was a widespread belief among the Hub principals interviewed that there were other indicators that the school, the teachers, the parents, the community and the students themselves understand to be reflective of achievement. These included: cultural knowledge, 'social skills', artistic and sporting excellence, creativity, 'community engagement', and so forth. One Indigenous principal of a very remote Hub School with 100% Indigenous students stated:

> … NAPLAN just isn't that important to us now. It will take time, but we've made progress with our communities in attendance and health. There are so many things we deal with every day and need to get in place that aren't about NAPLAN.

Her comments suggest that there are other general challenges and indicators of student welfare and engagement that are of central and prior importance. The further implication for schools is that given that classroom learning activities and associated assessments provide opportunities for participation or learning for Indigenous students, a close examination of classroom climate and interactions is needed *in addition* to analyses of achievement data at the school level.

Each state has developed an approach to NAPLAN annual testing in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 with related support for schools and teachers. NAPLAN testing, has impacted on teaching, curriculum and assessment at all levels of schooling:

- National Level: the MCEETYA annual report and *MySchool* database;
- State Level: e.g., the Western Australian Monitoring Standards in Education (WAMSIE) policy; 2010 Queensland School Curriculum Audits;
- Regional level: various professional development activities offered to support the improvement of NAPLAN scores and local directives about priorities for student improvement;
- School level: tracking and monitoring of Year Level cohorts and individual students to prepare for NAPLAN as described; and
- Classroom level: test preparation; diagnostic and remedial work; and streaming.

To date there has been no recorded evidence of generalised effects across numeracy and literacy gains for Indigenous students. Across-the-board NAPLAN improvements are empirically unlikely if not impossible. Specific improvement and gains in some test domains such as Reading, Writing, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation, or Numeracy is possible. However, this appears to be dependent on a range of factors and conditions such as investment in professional development in curriculum and pedagogy and infrastructure support to sustain such development.

Visits to the SSLC Hub schools provided some evidence of shifts in curriculum focus as a consequence of assessment activities and test preparation. Here a secondary metropolitan Hub school teacher reports on the use of class time and identifies how the teaching of literacy now involves completing assessments rather than 'normal literacy'. This represents a distortion of the curriculum objectives:

> …mainly with getting assessments done, which is probably the major thing that they [teachers] have to do. They don't do a lot of just normal literacy and things. *There might be a few classes that have a workbook on literacy where they just go through and do activities but most of it's mainly the assessment tasks.* Just getting them [students] going on that and just keeping them going and getting it done basically.

In a similar way there is a shift in curriculum focus in the following instance where teachers at this primary provincial school are aware that the writing genre to be tested in the NAPLAN test is persuasive writing. As a result, teachers prepare students for this test for the entire term as this teacher explains:

> You know all first term it's persuasive. Teaching the genre of persuasive writing because that's - *we know that's what's happening in NAPLAN and doing the practice tests are*

> *preparing them for the test conditions* … so that's happening - which happens in every school. I guess ... we have to do reporting to parents as is the required schedule from the department of education.

Preparation for NAPLAN was observed in some primary schools where students are given practice tests and work sheets based on the question types from past NAPLAN tests. Principals justified this practice. In some states, schools have been audited since 2010 and priorities are identified for teacher attention. This metropolitan, primary school principal stated that she values a more holistic approach to the curriculum that attends to student well-being and the arts, as well as numeracy and literacy. This principal described the situation at her metropolitan Hub school:

> *We had an audit* … basically they said we do some things fantastically well … *In terms of our learning culture this environment was superb.* But one of the criticisms was that we were trying to do too much … I'll cop that criticism … *we needed to narrow our focus in terms of our specific outcomes for kids* … so we figured like reading was the one, *reading comprehension is the one element that will bring more with it* … You know you can easily work on a child's writing and their spelling and their numeracy and all the other areas if they are reading well.

Several SSLC Hub principals reported that they had made curriculum decisions about which programs to adopt based on their current NAPLAN scores. Nonetheless, there appeared to be no consistent patterns, benchmarks or guidelines for the translation of NAPLAN results into the selection of specific curriculum programs, in-service interventions or training modules. This may, in part, explain the eclectic and diverse curriculum decisions observed.

Only a few teachers interviewed were aware of assessment for learning models and, while many were critical of testing, very few had attempted to modify assessment practice to accommodate or engage with the knowledges and cultures of the Indigenous students in their classes. In one school a pro-active approach to assessment was observed with the implementation of an assessment for learning program which: "is trying to align the assessment practices across the college and ultimately improve the implementation of syllabuses for the kids so that their learning outcomes improve." The other area of assessment where expanded developmental work is underway is in the growth of Personalised Learning Plans.

Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs)

Many of the SSLC Hub schools have implemented Personalised Learning Plans. The Closing the Gap - Expanding Intensive Literacy and Numeracy Programs for Indigenous Students Australian Government (2012) - budget initiative provided funding to support teachers to prepare and maintain PLPs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in every year of schooling up to Year 10. Research into the practice of the use of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) found that the term 'Personalised Learning' was more appropriate than the term 'Individual Learning' which can imply learning in isolation to others.

Personalised Learning Planning is an active process that involves teachers in consultation with students and parents identifying, organising and applying personalised approaches to learning. Diagnostic assessment is the first step in the process and entails the use of student achievement data together with data related to patterns of behaviour, attendance, attitude to school, social skills, family background and cultural understandings. Once the information is collected it is brought to the meeting with the student, their parents/family and other support people. Specific learning goals and strategies to support the students to meet agreed goals are identified.

Personalised approaches to learning, which may involve a variety of teaching strategies including whole class, small group and individual one-on-one tutoring were recommended in the Review of Aboriginal Education in 2004 conducted by the government of New South Wales (NSW AECG & NSWDET, 2004) for all Indigenous students. This approach to assessment and learning is more in keeping with recent models of assessment that link with sociocultural views of learning (Murphy, Hall, McCormick & Drury 2008; Pryor & Crossouard 2008). The process of interacting and providing feedback, engaging students actively and acknowledging the agency of the student *and* their parents and carers in this process is considered to be more responsive to student resources and capacities, and the cultural contexts of learning. Personalised learning involves working with each student, in

partnership with students, parents and carers, to develop a plan that reflects the student's goals, current capabilities and includes specific learning targets (DEEWR 2011).

By including such processes in the assessment practices of the PLP approach the political dimension of justice is brought to the fore. Fraser explains that the most general meaning of justice is parity of participation which: "requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction" (Fraser, 2005, 5). The obstacles to full participation include economic structures that deny some people the resources they need in order to interact with others as peers. In Fraser's words they suffer from "distributive injustice or maldistribution" (Fraser, 2005, 5).

Cazden argues that the educational meaning of 'redistribution' relates to:

> 'Resources' that require more equitable distribution [that] certainly include intellectual matters as well as monetary. More specifically, educational recognition means ensuring access – in every school and classroom, not just in the rhetoric of policy and plans – to an intellectually rich curriculum for all students, especially those whose families and communities have been denied that access in the past. (2012: 182)

The PLP approach opens up the opportunities for greater participation and redistribution of resources through the acknowledgement and involvement of all in the assessment processes that give agency to students, their parents or carers, *and* the teacher.

Fraser explains that the other obstacle for some people to parity of interacting is by "institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing." In other words they suffer from status "inequality or misrecognition" here the problem Fraser goes on to explain is the status order, which corresponds to its "cultural dimension" (Fraser, 2005, 5)

Cazden (2012: 182) too suggests: "Educational justice … would require recognition and inclusion in the school curriculum of [Indigenous] histories, cultures and knowledges." The PLP process is seen as a way of involving community and parents in the assessment and learning practices of the school and has been a way of extending teacher participation into the communities with home visits to families. It is also a way of incorporating the students' goals and learning targets into the PLP by consulting with the student's parents in recognition and redistribution of Indigenous knowledges.

Yet deficit constructions of Indigenous families, stereotypical assumptions about Indigenous families and students in deficit terms still persist which will require further resistance and challenge in some schools. There is evidence that the PLP process has the potential to engage the teacher, the Indigenous Education Worker, the Indigenous student and their parents in a constructive dialogue about success. SSLC schools have adopted a variety of approaches with differing outcomes achieved, both intended and unintended. These vary greatly in their commitment to the process. *In some schools the PLP process at the outset was reduced to obtaining the parents' or carers' signature on the ILP or PLP while in others the process was introduced, systematically involving structural change and systemic valuing of the active process.* One approach considered exemplary is presented now.

In New South Wales, PLPs were mandated for Aboriginal students in all public schools following the NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Review (2006)[4]. This review was described as "a landmark consultation through which many voices spoke about what needs to change if Aboriginal students are to benefit equitably from education and training" (2006: 1). For parents and carers it raised the following important concerns: there was no contact with the school unless the child was in trouble; the belief that if the child was not in trouble, then he or she was doing well, however, parents and carers were often shocked to find that their children couldn't read and spell; and that students who behave well and attend school, are not engaged with learning.

At this particular Provincial SSLC Hub primary school with over 40% Indigenous students, a Personalised Learning Plan policy was developed and implemented in 2007. Today it is

[4] Goal 3.1 of the NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy 2006-2008 (2006: 6) is to: "Develop Personalised Learning Plans for all Aboriginal school students in partnership with teachers, parents, caregivers and students".

institutionalized, with teachers, parents and carers clearly aware that the PLP is an outcome of a process involving teachers in:

- Assessing an individual student's learning achievements and needs using benchmark data, Basic Skills/NAPLAN test results and other classroom assessment;
- Consulting with parents/carers to better understand the student including parents' aspirations and the students' strengths and interests;
- Developing strategies to address student's learning needs that build on strengths and interests;
- Implementing the plan within the class teaching and learning program; and
- Reviewing and revising the plan within the school assessment and reporting cycle.

The systemic and systematic approach to the PLP process is supplemented with professional development activities for teachers to: develop their understanding of the role of PLPs in the teaching, learning and assessment cycles; develop their confidence in the use of PLPs; and develop their understanding of how best to interact and involve parents in the process. Teachers are provided with a PLP template and examples of targets and strategies together with literacy and numeracy assessment tools and a planning template to assist them use the PLP process (See Figures 3, 4 & 5). The Assistant Principal (AP) explained:

> *Building relationships with the community is core to the PLP process* for this school. It promotes parents' engagement with their child's learning through participation in the development of the plan with their child's teacher. *The focus for the classroom teacher is to provide a range of quality teaching and learning strategies* to develop students' confidence and competence, accommodate different learning styles and paces of learning. The focus for the PLP is on basic skills and giving opportunities for enrichment extension.

At the outset the AP was the key facilitator for the PLP process and funds were used to give her time to establish procedures and manage consultation with staff and community. Teachers, students and parents play an equal role in the PLP process, supported by the school's Indigenous Education Worker (IEW). Staff at this SSLC primary school recognise the PLP as an integral part of teaching and learning and the school assessment and reporting cycle, which occur in the classroom throughout the year. This school identified the value of the process in building partnerships within and beyond the school to support learning achievements and enhance the well being of individual students.

It took three years to institutionalise the PLP process, which included every Indigenous student plus one non-Indigenous student who was identified as someone who would benefit from the process. Given the low socioeconomic status of the school community, staff were concerned that this approach created a level of inequity so a staged implementation took place with PLPs introduced for 75% of the student population in the second year, followed by full implementation in the third year. Exemptions occurred for those students with moderate intellectual disabilities in the IO class (support class in NSW for students with a moderate intellectual disability).

In the first year of PLP meetings, the principal and the AP supported staff by participating in the meetings to monitor the process and to build stronger relationships with parents. Meetings were for half an hour and held twice a year in each semester at times to suit parents on a designated day or set of afternoons. Class teachers personally invite parents to attend the PLP meeting for their child which is supported by phone calls and home visits by the IEW (who attended all the meetings at the outset of the program) and who facilitates transport for parents where required.

Each student has a PLP individual folder, which is used in the meetings and these folders move with the student from one year to the next to enable teachers to track progress. Each folder contains a signed copy of all Personalised Learning Plans, the student's Literacy/Numeracy work sample and assessment schedule, relevant work samples and attendance chart. During the meeting the teacher, student and parents discuss the child's literacy and numeracy strengths and areas for development and together they agree on targets and strategies. The student is invited to talk about his/her own goals either as personal achievements or educational goals. Following is an example PLP template and accompanying instructions to teachers:

Insert Figures 1, 2, 3 & 4 Here.

A teacher from this school expresses her opinion of the benefits of the PLPs for students and their parents:

> I think it is the biggest plus, the PLPs. The curriculum is great, but to have those opportunities to develop those positive relationships is amazing. Everyone just walks around beaming after PLPs. And the kids are part of that PLP and have shown Mum or Dad all the things that they have been doing, well it just sets you up for the rest of the year. Where as in the past there were parents that you didn't ever meet.

The practice of PLPs as mandated in several states is seen as a way of informing parents through engaging them in the discursive PLP processes. The PLP practice appears to be spreading with variable approaches to uptake and use of achievement data for the improvement of student learning outcomes, primarily for Indigenous students, but also recently extended to include all students in some SSLC schools. Teacher relief time and resources have been made available for the development of PLPs.

Classroom Assessment Practice

A range of classroom assessment practices were identified with some teachers possessing a varied repertoire inclusive of an understanding of assessment for learning approaches. These practices incorporate sharing learning intentions and success criteria with the students, asking open-ended questions, providing feedback to students about how they can improve, and engaging students in peer- and self-assessment such that the agency of the students is acknowledged and enacted. At the other end of the continuum of observed classroom assessment practices are teacher practices that are more reliant on assessment of learning, or summative assessments, as a dominant strategy. Work sheets and short answer tests were typical of this form of assessment. In some SSLC schools, principals were aware of the need to raise teachers' awareness of contemporary understandings in assessment theory and practice with professional development and training organised. As a secondary, metropolitan Hub school principal stated:

> [s]o we try and look at a number of assessments. In previous years we've been looking at assessment for learning. We haven't looked at that this year with our staff about assessment of, for and as learning. We'll be doing a little bit of that or we'll be doing a lot of that next year.

Some SSLC primary and secondary schools have organised and managed the approach to classroom assessment at a whole school level for reasons of logistics, management, co-ordination, timetabling, consistency and accountability. Team planning of assessment at the school level occurs with the appointment of a co-ordinator to collate and manage the assessment and administration of the tasks. A teacher from a metropolitan secondary Hub school explains:

> it's a major focus for 18 months, so we have learning innovation teams and we've got teachers from each - so if it's English, we'll have a teacher from the three campuses come and they're developing assessment tasks, looking at their teaching and learning material, trying to raise the rigour of the assessment tasks. So that's a huge project and I'm looking after that.

There were very few examples of high quality assessment practice identified where teachers recognised the cultural variations of their Indigenous students and understood how these differences mediate the Indigenous students' learning and assessment outcomes. In one school there was some evidence of how teachers were aiming to connect with the Indigenous students' cultural background and context in their pedagogy through thoughtful consideration of the assessment tasks and approaches used. However, in many SSLC schools there was no policy or direction in how to embed Indigenous perspectives and no assessment practice that connected to the culture and context of Indigenous students to assess those understandings that culturally matter. Here the principal of a secondary Hub school highlights the importance of establishing relationships and the use of the PLP process as a useful way to engage the Indigenous students.

> *I think by just having, building excellent relationships, confidence within the classroom, like using their PLPs to tap in on their strengths* so that we - often times the kid might be a better speaker than writer. *Let's assess him orally*, you know?

In field visits and interviews, we observed few cases where attempts to develop high quality responsive or sensitive models of assessment.

Conclusion

From research data collected and analysed from visits and surveys of SSLC Hub schools, school leaders referred to the new policy imperative to manage, disseminate, analyse and interpret data such as NAPLAN, attendance and other available systemic forms. The data systems that have emerged range from sophisticated district or regional level schemes (some with online data manipulation and analysis software) to whole school, class and individual student monitoring arrangements. In SSLC Hub schools visited, it was observed that the assessment data was used for both secondary and primary purposes of:

- Overall school policy and priorities;
- Tracking and streaming of students into ability-based groups and whole class cohorts;
- Organising pull-out or withdrawal classes;
- Diagnosing for ascertainment, targeted support and remediation;
- Planning school and year level curriculum;
- Holding teachers to account for student performance; and
- Selecting certification pathways for students.

In this article I set out to critically analyse the push for standardized testing and improved scores in a heightened accountability context to argue for a greater balance of assessment types by providing alternative, inclusive, participatory approaches to student assessment such as the PLP.

I have drawn from the works of Nancy Fraser and her reframing of justice to argue that access is an important consideration in assessment practice particularly for those students who are culturally, socially, economically or linguistically diverse. These students need access to the curriculum and "opportunity to demonstrate their talent to good effect" (Gipps & Stobart 2009: 105). And, in Cazden's framework for social justice in education the meaning of 'identity' applies to 'what' is taught as in the curriculum, and the meaning of 'status' applies to 'how' it is taught, the quality of the teaching, particularly through the moment-to-moment teacher-student interactions (Cazden 2012: 183; Cazden 2001). Greater links to the knowledge of the student and locally relevant knowledge as gained in the PLP process of including relevant information about family background and cultural understanding are a step forward to social justice in terms of recognition and representation.

Assessment practices that recognise the agency of learners and call for a different teacher-student relationship where both are learners, gaining important knowledge from interactions and exchanges during the assessment processes provide opportunities for students to be brought into assessment practice as a shared enterprise, together with their parents, teachers and aides. Aspirations and expectations can also be facilitated and raised. The involvement of parents in discursive assessment practices helps to develop useful and productive relationships that can be beneficial to the students *and* their teachers. The recognition of the cultural knowledges and experiences that students bring to their learning contexts constitutes important access and social justice issues. Here *the use of analyses* of students' achievement data is crucial for diagnostic and planning purposes. However, school leaders and teachers need support and resources to make informed decisions from monitoring and analysis of assessment data.

The PLP process, together with other forms of classroom assessment, is seen as a way of involving community and parents in the assessment and learning practices of the school and has been a way of extending teacher participation into the communities with home visits to families. The PLP process has the potential to engage the teacher, the IEW, the student and their parents in constructive dialogue. It is here that Cazden's (2012: 183) framework for social justice in education becomes significant. In her interpretation of recognition she cites Fraser (2000: 4) and Fraser's alternative 'social status' interpretation of recognition:

> What requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of individual members as full partners in social interaction … and

> Redressing misrecognition now means changing social institutions – or, more specifically, changing the interaction-regulating values that impede participation at all relevant institutional sites. (Fraser (2000: 5)

In the PLP assessment process the interactions extend beyond the teacher-student interactions to include interactions with the parents and the IEW. This process challenges the existing 'interaction-regulating values' that impede participation. The PLP process is inclusive engaging Indigenous families in the decision-making, thereby attending to the social justice dimensions of recognition and representation. At this school level of PLP decision-making teacher, student, parent and IEW are all involved. This is one way that more respectful and positive relationships between the stakeholders can be developed and "expertise … pooled to achieve objectives that are consistent with the aspirations of community members" (Heslop 1998 cited by Cazden 2012: 185). These represent small steps towards fairer assessment practices for more equitable outcomes.

Acknowledgements
This article is based on research and evaluation, which was funded by Australian Government Deparment of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and conducted by a team of colleagues. The views represented in this article are those of the author and do not represent the views of DEEWR, the Stronger Smarter Institute and the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities Project nor the authors of the Formative and Summative Evaluations of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities Project.

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